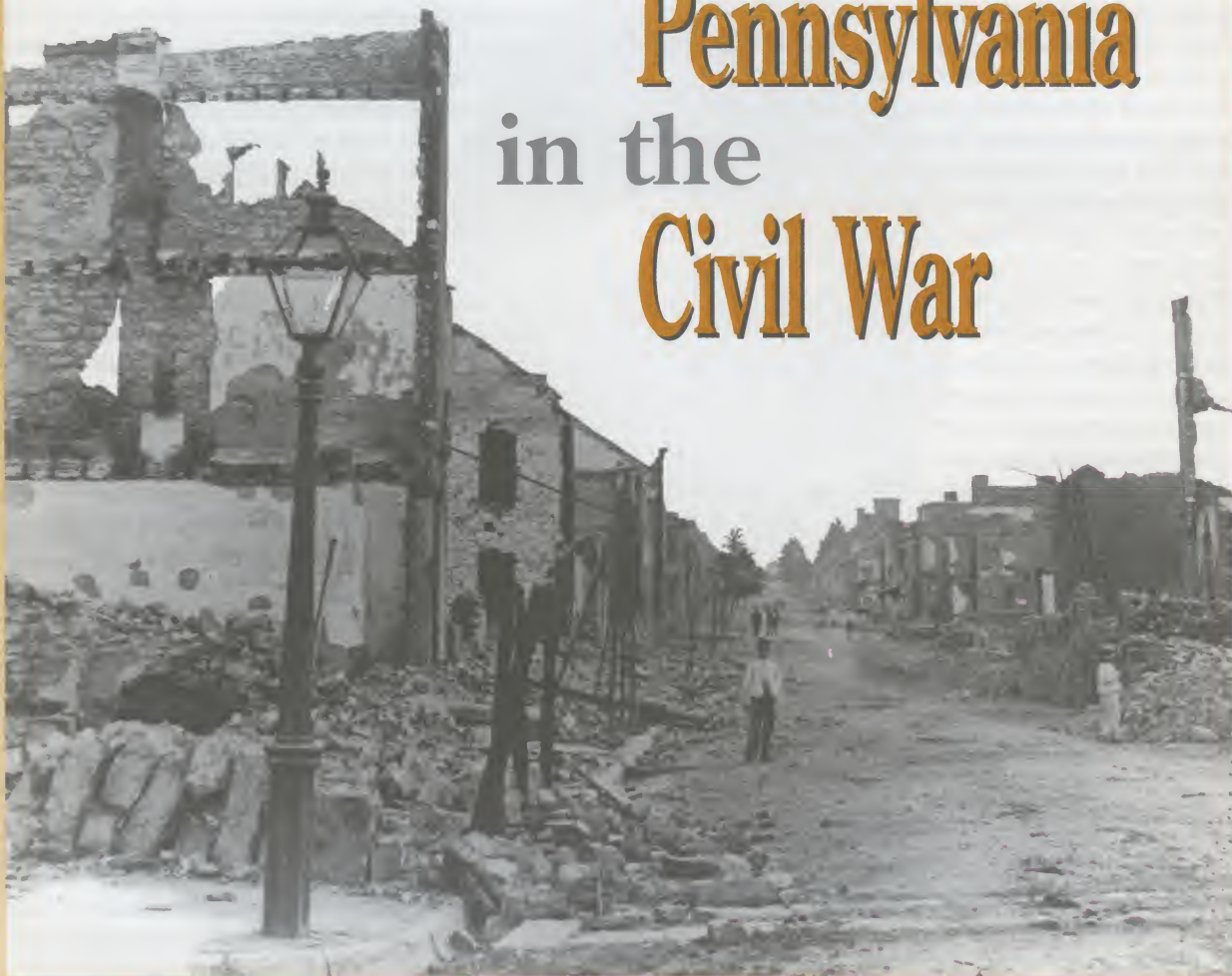


Pennsylvania in the Civil War



Ruins of Chambersburg in July 1864 after Confederates torched the town. Cumberland County Historical Society.

Just as Pennsylvania earned the nickname "the Keystone State" for its central role in the nation's formative years, the Commonwealth earned that reputation anew during the country's second great trial, the Civil War. During four years of war, Pennsylvania contributed substantial human and material resources to the war to end slavery and preserve the nation. At times, with its southernmost boundary the fissure point between free and slave states, Pennsylvania directly felt the tempest of war. Yet in spite of its legacy as a keystone, the story of Pennsylvania in the Civil War is hardly one of unanimous support for the Union. No corner of the Commonwealth escaped the war's long reach, and many of those touched lacked enthusiasm for the national cause.

Initially, many Pennsylvanians accepted secession, but the public mood shifted dramatically when the Confederates shelled Fort Sumter, South Carolina in April, 1861. In an outpouring of patriotism, Pennsylvania volunteers quickly answered President Abraham Lincoln's call for troops to quell the rebellion. Days after the attack on the fort, Pennsylvania Governor Andrew Curtin rushed five companies of plucky—if underarmed—militia from Pottsville, Reading, Allentown, and Lewistown to the unprotected capitol in Washington, D.C. This timely intervention earned these troops the title "First Defenders."

In the succeeding four years of war more than 360,000 Pennsylvanians wore Union blue. Many trained at Camp Curtin near Harrisburg, a huge stag-

ing and supply depot, others prepared at smaller camps in Easton, Pittsburgh, and West Chester. A majority of Pennsylvania troops fought in the eastern theater, with only about 10 percent serving in the western armies. Few white Pennsylvanians enlisted to free black slaves from bondage. Most detested slavery, but not on moral grounds. Rather, they eyed slave labor as a threat to their status and livelihood as paid free workers. Numerous factors motivated volunteering, including patriotism, the threat of being drafted, or often generous “bounties” paid for enlisting. The conflict also attracted thousands of teenage enlistees with the illusion of war as an adventure. Bored with the humdrum of farm or village life, they viewed the war as an opportunity for escape and personal heroism.

Pennsylvania blacks, however, probably viewed the war as an opportunity to prove their worthiness and to strike at the southern slave system. Of all the northern states, Pennsylvania ranked first in the number of black soldiers—8,612—mustered for the Union cause. When Pennsylvania began recruiting blacks in mid-1863, the War Department established Camp William Penn north of Philadelphia where eleven thousand blacks had been trained by the war’s end. The eleven regiments of United States Colored Troops recruited in Pennsylvania often suffered racial indignities while demonstrating their soldierly mettle. Initially paid less than white recruits, they were often given menial jobs and faced the prospect of being reenslaved or killed if captured by the Confederates.

A number of Pennsylvania regiments merit special mention. The 6th United States Colored Troops lost 62 percent of its men during an assault on New Market Heights near Richmond in 1864. Two of its members received the Congressional Medal of Honor for gallantry. In the western theater, the 9th Pennsylvania Cavalry rode with the Army of the Cumberland as the only eastern cavalry participating in “Sherman’s March.” The Pennsylvania Reserves, thirteen regiments that fought as the only army division from a single state, ranks among the notable Pennsylvania infantry organizations. Although originally created by Governor Curtin as a reserve force to defend the Commonwealth, the Pennsylvania Reserves struggled on such hard-fought battlefields as the Seven Days, Second Manassas, South Mountain, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, the Wilderness, and Spotsylvania. Pennsylvania’s most famed regiment of the war, the “Bucktails,” formed the thirteenth regiment of the Reserves. Organized in the timbering counties of northwestern Pennsylvania, the Bucktails sported white-tailed deer tails on their caps as a symbol of their skilled marksmanship.

Pennsylvania furnished not only manpower but also ample military leadership to the Union cause, including two army commanders, four admirals, twelve major generals, and forty-eight brigadier generals. Pennsylvanians George B. McClellan and George G. Meade both led the Army of the Potomac.

McClellan whipped the army into a capable fighting machine, while Meade won the climactic battle

at Gettysburg and remained in command until the war’s end. Major generals of importance from Pennsylvania include Winfield S. Hancock and John F.

Reynolds. To the naval war Pennsylvania contributed Admiral David Dixon Porter, who helped capture New Orleans and batter open the Mississippi with his gunboat fleet, Rear Admiral John Dahlgren, and Montgomery C. Meigs, termed “the unsung hero of the Civil War” by one historian, served as the Union’s energetic and efficient quartermaster-general.

Pennsylvania ranked second only to New York in the number of troops it furnished the Union, but faced additional burdens because of its proximity to the fighting. Many towns served as supply depots or staging areas, while troop trains rumbled





Company H, 114th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry, from Philadelphia known as the Zouaves D'Afrique.
U.S. Army Military History Institute

through the Commonwealth constantly. Soldiers passing through to the front as well as returning wounded needed sustenance and aid. Much more troublesome was the fact that war itself sometimes crossed the border into Pennsylvania.

Each time the war entered Pennsylvania it arrived through the Cumberland Valley, a natural avenue from the South. In an October 1862 lightning raid, Confederate General J. E. B. Stuart surprised an unwary citizenry by galloping into Chambersburg, the site of a Union supply center. Stuart burned a Union storehouse, stole 1,200 horses, and escaped with \$150,000 worth of supplies.

Nearly two years later in July, 1864 three thousand Confederate cavalry again swept into Chambersburg. The Confederates threatened to burn the town in retaliation for Union vandalism in Virginia, unless they received \$100,000 in gold or \$500,000 in currency. Forewarned of the raid, many Chambersburg citizens fled with their property, and left empty bank vaults behind. When the ransom failed to appear, the troopers applied the torch, leaving two-thirds of Chambersburg's inhabitants homeless.

In the summer of 1863, Confederate General Robert E. Lee shifted the entire theater of war into Pennsylvania. Riding the crest of recent victories, Lee hoped his invading army might encourage demoralized northerners to demand an end to the war. With its infrastructure of industries, agriculture, railroads, and Susquehanna River bridges supplying the Union life blood, Pennsylvania seemed a prime target.

In late June, citizens in Harrisburg, Pittsburgh, and other locations prepared for invasion by digging

fortifications. South-central Pennsylvanians clogged the roads, driving their belongings and livestock northward beyond the enemy's reach. Yet in spite of Governor Curtin's repeated calls for volunteers to defend the Commonwealth, citizens responded less than enthusiastically. Days after Curtin's final plea for sixty thousand recruits, only sixteen thousand men had come forward. Both the New York militia that hurried to Harrisburg as well as invading Confederates noticed an abundance of military-age men loitering on town streets, seemingly indifferent to the crisis. Before Lee decided to concentrate his troops near Gettysburg, a few encounters between Confederate troops and Curtin's emergency militia occurred at Wrightsville, Camp Hill (Sporting Hill), and near Gettysburg. Except for preventing easy Confederate crossing of the Susquehanna by burning the Wrightsville bridge, militia activity could be summed up in the words of a Confederate general who termed it "a source of amusement to my troops."

One historian comments that Pennsylvania's response to the Confederate invasion of 1863 "was not one of the state's finest hours." Yet the culminating event of the campaign, the July 1-3 Battle of Gettysburg, chronicled more ennobling deeds for Pennsylvanians. This significant victory for the Union was fought on Pennsylvania soil, with a Pennsylvanian, George G. Meade, in command of the Army of the Potomac. Generals Winfield S. Hancock and John F. Reynolds, corps commanders, who played conspicuous roles in the battle, were Pennsylvanians. Lieutenant Col. Strong Vincent earned his general's star by giving up his life on Little Round Top. More than twenty-eight thousand Pennsylvania officers and enlisted men stood in the ranks at Gettysburg—nearly one-third of Meade's army, and performed some of the battle's most conspicuous acts of selfless courage.

Gettysburg became an overnight sensation, recognized as the battle where the fortunes of war turned for the Union. Almost as soon as the fighting ceased, Pennsylvanians took steps to preserve the battlefield. Coupled with President Lincoln's address for the

Union dead, Gettysburg in time became the Civil War's representative battleground. Today Gettysburg remains the Civil War's most popular battlefield, drawing nearly two million visitors annually.

The Union forces did not win the Civil War simply through battlefield victories. Success depended on the link between troops at the front and their home communities. Modern armies need sophisticated ordnance, supplies, and transportation, as well as social networks at home that boost troop morale. Behind the battle lines, Pennsylvania poised itself against the Confederacy with industrial power and organizations dedicated to aiding soldiers and their families. Support for the Union on the home front ranged from patriotism to greed. There were pockets of dissenters everywhere, and their reasons for opposing the war varied. Some in cities with ties to the South were pro-Southern "Copperheads," while many urban immigrants opposed a war that promised to emancipate blacks. Most Pennsylvania dissenters opposed wartime authority emanating from a distant federal government. Within Pennsylvania, a longtime Democratic state, politics proceeded turbulently during a war fought by a Republican administration. Especially during periods when there seemed no end to the war, Democrats attacked government tyranny and charged that freed slaves would threaten Pennsylvania jobs. But timely military victories and Governor Andrew Curtin's devotion to the Lincoln administration sustained Pennsylvania's support. Of all the northern governors, Lincoln relied heavily on Curtin for aid and advice. One of Curtin's most memorable endeavors, the 1862 Altoona War Governors' Confer-

ence, quelled discord among northern governors and affirmed support for Lincoln's war policies.

The Lincoln administration's efforts to draft northerners into military service provoked anti-war sentiment. Draftees could avoid service by hiring a substitute or paying a \$300 commutation fee, inciting cries of "a rich man's war but a poor man's fight." Communities often sponsored balls or raffles to raise commutation money. In Pennsylvania's mountain and anthracite regions many eluded service, deserted, or lashed out against the draft. In northeastern Pennsylvania mobs of miners rioted and shut down collieries. The federal government rushed in troops to sustain the flow of coal and remained until the war's end.

In Clearfield and Cambria Counties, small armies of deserters congregated and armed themselves to resist authorities. One band on the Clearfield River protected themselves with a fort while they engaged in lumbering. A force of a thousand troops occupied Columbia County, a haven for draft dodgers and deserters. Although this force arrested delinquents, apparently some gave in willingly. A soldier from Columbia County wrote that many draftees from his region "fled to the mountains and commenced camp life there, but most of them (very wisely) came to the conclusion that if they must camp out they had better be paid for it and they are now reporting themselves to the commissioners of the draft. . ."

Despite manpower siphoned into military service and occasional strikes, the war boosted Pennsylvania industries. Pennsylvania supplied 80 percent of the federal war machine's iron, all of its anthracite coal, and much of its textiles, flour, and meat. Railroads, enhanced by a burst



Pennsylvania volunteers train at Camp Curtin near Harrisburg. From Harper's Weekly May 11, 1861.

of Pennsylvania-made locomotives, rails, and freight cars expanded along with the fledgling oil industry of western Pennsylvania. Many entrepreneurs launched private fortunes through lucrative government contracts. The Fort Pitt foundry in Pittsburgh manufactured over two thousand cannon during the war and ten million pounds of shot. In Philadelphia, C. Sharps & Co. turned out more than a thousand of its Sharps breech-loading rifles a month. The Philadelphia Navy Yard played a large role in building gunboats for the U.S. Navy, while the city's ready-made clothing industry produced uniforms and blankets.

The many changes forced on Pennsylvanians during the war altered patterns of life and disrupted families and communities. Thousands of children waved good-bye to fathers who never came home or returned disabled. After the war, orphanages were established across the state to provide homes for children whose wage-earning fathers had been killed or crippled. Many youths were drawn into industrial jobs during the conflict. Approximately 22 percent of the state's textile workers during the war were under sixteen years old. Growth in the number of wage earners from 98,397 in 1860 to 160,000 in 1866 occurred in part because both youths and women entered the paid work force.

Women confronted new challenges with menfolk away from home. Many undertook traditional male responsibilities on farms or entered occupations opened up by the war in government, industry, and army nursing. Thousands volunteered to sew, make bandages, and assemble food packages. Pennsylvania women acquired new visibility by dominating hundreds of relief organizations, including the U.S. Christian Commission and U.S. Sanitary Commission, national organizations that coordinated northern relief work and provided soldiers a variety of spiritual and physical comforts. But Pennsylvania women helped win the war in another important way. As moral guardians of the home, women influenced the martial enthusiasm of



T. Morris Chester, born in Harrisburg, encouraged African American enlistment and became the Civil War's only black news correspondent.

their male kin by approving enlistment and encouraging tenacity at the front. A wife's letter to her husband about hard times at home might prompt a desertion; a mother's patriotic words to her son might encourage volunteering. A teenage recruit from Wyoming County later recalled his mother "expected her boys to do their duty" and "reminded me that I was the grandson of two Revolutionary soldiers and should be sorry to know that I showed the 'white feather.'"

Pennsylvania served as the backbone of the Union arsenal, supplying troops as well as materiel and moral support to fight the war. At the same time, Pennsylvania harbored dissenters who either lacked enthusiasm for or opposed the war for a variety of reasons. Geography, which continues to shape Pennsylvania's history, proved a significant factor. Many Pennsylvanians were far more concerned about local and regional issues, and were indifferent to an abstract national cause.

In the end, the long shadow of the Civil War changed life in Pennsylvania, just as Pennsylvanians influenced the outcome of the war. The Commonwealth emerged with a strong economy, poised to become an industrial leader. The spurt of growth in manufacturing had resulted in the construction of more factories, new production processes, as well as in improved mechanization in agriculture.

Veterans organizations, most notably the GAR (Grand Army of the Republic), became important social outlets and politically influential. The generation that fought the war dominated Pennsylvania politics for decades, and left enduring monuments to its wartime sacrifice in innumerable town squares and county seats.

text by Jim Weeks

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